The Cross and the Sword:

An analysis of the Crisis in Russian Orthodoxy

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INTRODUCTION

When the cross becomes a sword and prayer turns into a call to arms, it signals not just a crisis, but a spiritual catastrophe. This book is devoted to an in-depth study of the tragic metamorphosis of the Russian Orthodox Church, which before our very eyes has transformed from a spiritual institution into an ideological apparatus that legitimizes state aggression and violence.

The starting point that revealed the depth of the fall was September 25, 2022. On that day, by order of Patriarch Kirill, all churches of the Russian Orthodox Church began to recite the *"Prayer for Holy Russia."* This text, containing a plea for victory ("grant us victory with Your power"), became a watershed—a point of no return—after which it became impossible to remain silent.

It is not merely a symptom, but the quintessence of systemic degradation that began long before these events. Based on the facts presented in numerous studies and journalistic investigations, the roots of the current crisis lie in the very foundation of the modern Moscow Patriarchate, created as a structure controlled by the security services, and in a conscious departure from the Gospel commandments for the sake of harmony with the authorities.

PART I: THEOLOGICAL COLLAPSE

The Gospel is at the heart of any Christian doctrine, and the Sermon on the Mount is its central part. "Blessed are the peacemakers," "love your

enemies," and "pray for those who mistreat you." These words of Christ form the moral foundation of Christianity, its universal and timeless core. Any action or teaching that contradicts them cannot, by definition, be considered Christian. It is from this position that we should analyze the *"Prayer for Holy Russia,"* which has become an obligatory part of worship.

According to a study of the text of the prayer, its content represents not just a departure from but a direct renunciation of New Testament teaching. The request, "grant us victory with Your power," shifts the focus from the spiritual salvation of all humanity to the military and political success of one particular state. Here, a fundamental substitution takes place: the universal God of love and mercy, who makes no distinction between "Hellenes and Jews," is replaced by a tribal deity who protects "his own" in armed conflict.

The prayer speaks of "those who seek to destroy Holy Russia," but completely ignores the fact that it was the Russian state that started this war. Instead of repentance and a call for peace, which would be the only possible response from the point of view of the Gospel, the Church calls on God to become an accomplice to bloodshed. This is a regression to Old Testament thinking, where war was the norm and victory was considered a sign of divine favor. Christ, however, brought a new law: the law of love, which abolished the principle of "an eye for an eye." The introduction of this prayer marks a rejection of that law.

This departure from Gospel principles was not accidental, but a conscious policy, as documented evidence confirms. The ideological justification of war as "sacred" was finally enshrined in the Decree XXV of the World Russian People's Council, chaired by Patriarch Kirill. This document explicitly states:

"*From a spiritual and moral point of view, the special military operation is a Holy War in which Russia and its people, defending the unified spiritual space of Holy Rus, are fulfilling the mission of the "Restrainer," protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the West, which has fallen into Satanism.*" *(*World Russian People's Council, 2024).

This quote leaves no room for interpretation. The leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church has officially declared the war holy, dividing the world into "Holy Russia" and the "Satanic West." Such Manichean dualism, dividing peoples into pure and impure, is a characteristic feature not of Christian theology, but of totalitarian and pagan cults. The proclamation of entire countries and civilizations as "fallen into Satanism" completely contradicts Christian anthropology, which asserts that the image of God is in every person, and that the struggle is not with "flesh and blood," but with the spiritual forces of evil.

Thus, the theological collapse of the Russian Orthodox Church lies not simply in its support for state aggression. It is expressed in the deliberate distortion and abolition of the fundamental principles of the Christian faith in order to serve political interests. The Church, called to be the conscience of the nation and the voice of peace, has voluntarily
assumed the role of the ideological department of the Ministry of Defense, blessing the sword and betraying the Cross.

PART II: SYMPHONY OF POWER

The history of the current crisis in the Russian Orthodox Church is a history of symbiosis, an unnatural alliance forged not in heaven but in the offices of the secret services. To understand how a prayer for peace could turn into a prayer for victory, it is necessary to trace the path that the Russian Orthodox Church has taken from Stalin's project to the ideological foundation of Putin's Russia.

Chapter 1. "The Red Church": Stalin, the KGB, and the Birth of the Moscow Patriarchate

The modern Moscow Patriarchate (ROC MP) is not the direct and unbroken successor to the historical Russian Church, whose canonical succession was forcibly interrupted in 1927. The current structure was created in 1943 on the direct orders of Joseph Stalin as a tool for solving specific political tasks. It was not a spiritual revival, but a cynical political project born in the bowels of the NKGB. Understanding this fact is key to unraveling the nature of the ROC MP and its inevitable dependence on state power in Russia.

Project "Patriarchate": The Political Expediency of 1943

By 1943, in the midst of the Great Patriotic War, Stalin was faced with the need to consolidate society by all means available. Religion, which he had recently tried to destroy, proved to be a powerful mobilizing resource. Patriotic appeals from the Church could strengthen the fighting spirit of the army and the home front. Millions of believers, despite decades of persecution, had retained their faith, and it would have been short-sighted to ignore this factor. However, Stalin did not want a free and independent Church, but rather a structure that was completely under his control and obedient to the will of the Kremlin. The "revival" of Orthodoxy became a

special operation entrusted to State Security Colonel Georgy Karpov, the future head of the Council for Russian Orthodox Church Affairs. On September 4, 1943, Stalin met with the three remaining metropolitans who were still at liberty and loyal to the regime: Sergius (Stragorodsky), Alexius (Simansky), and Nicholas (Yarushevich). According to Karpov's testimony, Stalin asked them what their "urgent needs" were. After decades of brutal repression, when thousands of priests had been shot and churches destroyed, this question sounded like mockery. But the metropolitans understood the rules of the game. Their main "need" turned out to be the restoration of the Patriarchate.

Stalin gave his approval. Just four days later, on September 8, 1943, the Moscow Patriarchate was restored.

The "Council of Bishops," to which nineteen bishops were brought under escort, was convened. This "council" was a flagrant violation of all church canons. According to the charter of the Local Council of 1917–1918, the Patriarch was to be elected with the participation of the clergy and laity, not by a handful of bishops gathered by order of the NKGB. Priest and human rights activist Gleb Yakunin, who studied the KGB archives, directly called the created structure a "totalitarian sect" that had no canonical succession from the historical Church.

"*But, in violation of all canonical norms, in 1943-1945, the godless authorities created a completely new, totalitarian-type religious organization alien to the Orthodox tradition, with new, previously non-existent church rules and a management structure copying Stalin's Politburo ("Metropolitan Bureau"), and, in fact, fitting the now fashionable definition of a 'totalitarian sect*'," (Gleb Yakunin).

But for Stalin, the canons were irrelevant. Political expediency was paramount. The Patriarchate, under his control, became a powerful tool of both domestic and foreign policy.

Domestic policy:

- **Consolidation of society:** The Church, blessing the authorities and calling for the defense of the "Fatherland," became an important element of patriotic propaganda.
  - **Control over believers:** The legal church structure made it possible to keep religious life in the country under surveillance, identifying and suppressing any independent and uncontrolled groups.

Foreign policy:

- **Influence on allies:** Demonstrating "religious freedom" in the USSR was important for improving the country's image in the eyes of its Western allies, primarily the United States and the United Kingdom.

- **Instrument of expansion:** After the war, the Russian Orthodox Church became a conduit for Soviet influence in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, where millions of Orthodox Christians lived. As Gleb Yakunin noted, Stalin sought to "unite the countries of the post-Byzantine space under the wing of Moscow as the Third Rome."

  Thus, the birth of the Moscow Patriarchate in 1943 was not an act of divine providence, but the result of cold political calculation. A structure created by a dictator to serve his regime could not be anything else. Its dependence on the state was laid down at the moment of its foundation.

  "Generals in Cassocks": The KGB's Network of Agents in the Russian Orthodox Church

  The merger of the Russian Orthodox Church with the special services was not a temporary alliance, but became the basis of its existence. Starting in 1943, no significant appointment in the church hierarchy took place without the approval of the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church and the supervising KGB officers. The church became a branch of the "office," and its hierarchy became officers of the ideological front, with agent pseudonyms.

  KGB archives declassified in the 1990s, which were studied by a parliamentary commission headed by Lev Ponomarev and Gleb Yakunin, revealed the shocking extent of the infiltration. The documents contain reports on the activities of agents with code names such as "Drozdov," "Adamant," "Mikhailov," "Abbot," "Antonov," and many others. Behind these pseudonyms were hidden the highest hierarchs of the Church.

The Commission draws the attention of the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church to the unconstitutional use of a number of church bodies by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the KGB of the USSR for their own purposes by recruiting and sending KGB agents to them. Thus, agents with the code names "Svyatoslav," "Adamant," "Mikhailov," "Topaz," "Nesterovich," "Kuznetsov," "Ognev," "Esauchenko," and others traveled abroad through the Department of External Church Relations. The nature of the tasks they performed testifies to the inseparability of this department from the state, to its transformation into a hidden center of KGB agents among believers."

(Commission of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, 1992).

The Department for External Church Relations (DECR) became a key structure for conducting KGB operations abroad. Under the cover of church diplomacy, ecumenical conferences, and pilgrimages, agents in cassocks carried out tasks to gather information, exert "beneficial influence" on Western circles, and discredit anti-Soviet figures. KGB reports describe in detail successful operations to promote desired candidates for positions in international religious organizations such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Christian Peace Conference (CPC).

One KGB report from 1969 mentioned that agents codenamed "Svyatoslav" traveled to England to participate in the work of the World Council of Churches. Agents codenamed “Adamant,” “Altar,” “Magister,” “Roschin,” and “Zemgorsk” also operated in this area; according to the report, agents there "prevented hostile actions" and helped promote agent Kuznetsov to a key position in the WCC.

The higher-ups were not just "informants." They were full-time employees of the system. The archives show that the future Patriarch Alexy II (Alexei Ridiger) was a KGB agent under the pseudonym "Drozdov," recruited as early as 1958. In February 1988, the chairman of the KGB prepared an order to award agent "Drozdov" a certificate of honor. His colleague in the Synod, Metropolitan Juvenaly (Poyarkov) of Krutitsy and Kolomna, was listed in the documents as agent "Adamant." Metropolitan Filaret (Denisenko), who later became head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church –- Kyivan Patriarchate, was agent "Antonov."

This system of total control not only ensured the loyalty of the Church, but also shaped a particular type of church figure: a conformist, a careerist for whom loyalty to the state was more important than loyalty to the Gospel. Decades of service in the KGB created a strong network of agents, which did not disappear with the collapse of the USSR, but was smoothly "inherited" by the FSB and the new Russian authorities. Priests, accustomed to reporting to a supervisor in uniform, easily found common ground with a regime built by people from the same special services.

The legacy of Sergianism: The Genetic Code of Conformism

The foundation for this symbiosis was laid even before 1943—in 1927, when Metropolitan Sergius (Stragorodsky), as deputy patriarchal locum tenens and with supreme ecclesiastical authority in his hands, published his infamous Declaration. In it, he proclaimed the principle of loyalty to the Soviet state, stating that Orthodox Christians recognize the Soviet

Union as their civil homeland, "whose joys and successes are our joys and successes, and whose failures are our failures." This act, which became known as

"Sergianism," became a symbol of betrayal of the interests of the Church for the sake of its legal survival under a totalitarian regime.

For many believers and priests, including more than sixty bishops who had been in the Solovetsky camps, this declaration was tantamount to apostasy— the renunciation of the faith. They could not accept the "joy" of their persecutors as their own joy. Thus, a tragic schism occurred: between the official, "Sergian" Church, which had made a deal with the authorities, and the underground church, which remained faithful to the canons and did not recognize the godless regime.

Sergianism became the "genetic code" that predetermined the future fate of the Moscow Patriarchate. It legitimized conformism and made it the norm of church life. The principle of loyalty to any authority, even an anti-Christian one, was elevated to the rank of virtue. Metropolitan Sergius justified his compromise by the salvation of the Church structure as such, but the price of this salvation was too high: the loss of spiritual freedom and moral authority.

In 1943, Stalin simply took advantage of an already existing model. Sergianism became the ideal ideological platform for the "Red Church." The hierarchy, raised in the spirit of Sergianism, was ready to serve not only out of fear or coercion, but also out of conviction, considering it the only possible way for the Church to survive.

This genetic code of conformity proved to be incredibly resilient. It allowed the Russian Orthodox Church to survive regime changes unscathed. Communist rule was replaced by democratic rule, then authoritarian rule, but the principle remained unchanged: "Your joys are our joys." It is the legacy of Sergianism that explains why the modern ROC has blended so organically with Putin's regime, willingly blessing its wars and legitimizing its ideology. This compromise, made almost a century ago, continues to define the behavior of the Church hierarchy, for whom harmony with the authorities is more important than harmony with God.

Chapter 2. Patriarch Kirill (Gundyayev): The Career of an Agent and Oligarch

The figure of Patriarch Kirill (born Vladimir Gundyaev) is key to understanding the current state of the Russian Orthodox Church. His biography is an expression of the vices of the system created during the Stalin era: close cooperation with the KGB, the merging of church ministry with commercial interests, and, finally, complete ideological integration with the authoritarian state. It was his career path, which began under the supervision of the KGB, that made it possible for the Russian Orthodox Church to become the main ideological stronghold of Putin's regime.

Agent "Mikhailov": The Beginning of a Career under the Supervision of the KGB

Vladimir Gundyaev began his church career rapidly and at a very young age, which was unusual for the Soviet era and only possible with the support of the "competent authorities." At the age of twenty-two, while a student at the Leningrad Theological Academy, he became the personal secretary of Metropolitan Nikodim (Rotov) of Leningrad and Novgorod, one of the most influential and controversial figures in the Russian Orthodox Church at the time, known for his ecumenical activities and close ties to the KGB. Metropolitan Nikodim, who appeared in the KGB archives as agent "Svyatoslav," was the creator of an entire school of "church diplomats" who carried out assignments for the special services under the cover of international contacts.

In 1971, at the age of twenty-five, Gundyaev was elevated to the rank of archimandrite and appointed representative of the Moscow Patriarchate to the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva. This was a key position that gave him access to foreign travel and contacts with foreigners—an area that was under the complete control of the KGB. According to declassified archival documents, the young archimandrite Kirill was a KGB agent with the pseudonym "Mikhailov."

KGB reports on work through the World Council of Churches mention that in February 1973, agents codenamed "Magister" and "Mikhailov" traveled to Thailand and India to participate in WCC events. At the same time, the visit of WCC General Secretary Philip Porter to the USSR was accompanied by work with him through agents "Svyatoslav," "Adamant," "Mikhailov," and Ostrovsky, who were tasked with "exerting a favorable influence" and obtaining "information of operational interest" (according to publications of declassified KGB documents).

His work in the Department for External Church Relations (DECR), which Gundyaev headed in 1989, became the pinnacle of his career as a "diplomat in a cassock." The DECR, as confirmed by a 1992 parliamentary commission, functioned as a "hidden center of KGB agents among

believers." As head of this department, Metropolitan Kirill became one of the most influential hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church, overseeing all international relations and, accordingly, maintaining close contacts with the special services.

This part of his biography is not just a "dark spot" in his past. It is the key to his current role. Decades of working in a system where loyalty to the state and its special services was a prerequisite for a career shaped his worldview and management style. As Deacon Andrei Kuraev noted, in the 1990s, Metropolitan Kirill may have seemed like a "liberal," but this was only mimicry, typical of experienced apparatchiks. When the vector of state power changed, so did he. His past as an agent "Mikhailov" made him the ideal partner for Vladimir Putin, a man who came from the same system. Their alliance was predetermined by their shared background and understanding of how power works.

The "Tobacco Metropolitan": The Business Empire of the 1990s

After the collapse of the USSR, amid the economic chaos and "wild capitalism" of the 1990s, the Russian Orthodox Church received unprecedented economic privileges. One of the most scandalous chapters in the history of the Church during that period was its commercial activities related to the duty-free import of excise goods—alcohol and cigarettes. The Department for External Church Relations, headed by Metropolitan Kirill, played a key role in this business.

In the 1990s, the government granted the Russian Orthodox Church and its affiliated structures privileges for importing goods, ostensibly for the restoration of churches and the financing of humanitarian programs. Under the guise of "humanitarian aid," a flood of cigarettes and alcohol poured into the country, which were then sold through commercial networks. This activity caused enormous damage to the Church's reputation. Among the public, Metropolitan Kirill was nicknamed "the Tobacco Metropolitan."

According to a parliamentary commission that investigated these activities, the scale was enormous. Priest Gleb Yakunin, citing official data, provided the following figures:

According to official data, in 1995 alone, the Department for External Church Relations received US$75 million, and in 1996, US$23 million from poisoning the Russian population with cheap duty-free imported tobacco.

The Nikolo-Ugreshsky Monastery (directly subordinate to the Patriarch) made a profit of $350 million solely from accustoming the population to the "devil in a bottle" through the sale of alcohol (Gleb Yakunin).

The DECR, headed by Metropolitan Kirill, was the main beneficiary of this scheme. The money received from the sale of tobacco and alcohol was used not so much for the restoration of churches as for strengthening the power and financial independence of church structures, primarily the DECR itself. This activity turned the department into a kind of "state within a state" within the Russian Orthodox Church, with enormous financial resources and influence.

This period shaped another important trait of the future Patriarch: pragmatism and business acumen bordering on cynicism. He learned to use his position to gain material benefits and build business empires. This experience proved invaluable in the 2000s, when the Russian Orthodox Church began to actively integrate into state and business projects under Putin.

Accusations of commercializing church life have dogged Kirill throughout his career. The scandal over "tobacco privileges" was just one episode. Subsequently, he was credited with involvement in the oil business, banking, and luxury goods trade.

Chapter 3. "Russian World" and "Holy War": The New Ideology of the Empire

The symbiosis between the Kremlin and the Moscow Patriarchate could not remain merely a pragmatic alliance. For its existence, it required a comprehensive ideology—a doctrine that could clothe geopolitical ambitions in a quasi-religious form. This doctrine became the "Russian World," and its logical conclusion was the declaration of a "holy" war in Ukraine. These concepts, developed and promoted with the active participation of Patriarch Kirill, marked the final stage of the transformation of the Russian Orthodox Church into the ideological department of imperial revanchism.

The Doctrine of the "Russian World": Theology in the Service of Geopolitics

The concept of the "Russian World" began to take shape in the mid-2000s and was finalized by Patriarch Kirill after his enthronement in 2009. At first glance, it appealed to the idea of the cultural and historical unity of the peoples who emerged from the baptismal font of Kiev. However, behind this plausible rhetoric lay an aggressive political doctrine designed to

justify Moscow's right to dominate the post-Soviet space.

Key tenets of the “Russian World” doctrine:

- **Supranational unity:** There exists a single civilization — the "Russian World," the core of which is Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. The borders of this civilization do not coincide with state borders and are determined by a common language, culture, and, most importantly, the Orthodox faith under the omophorion of the Moscow Patriarchate.
- **Spiritual space:** The territory of the "Russian world" is declared a "single spiritual space" or "canonical territory" of the Russian Orthodox Church. This blurs the distinction between ecclesiastical jurisdiction and political sovereignty. Any attempts by local churches (for example, in Ukraine) to gain independence from Moscow are interpreted not as a canonical issue, but as an attack on the very unity of the "Russian World."
- **Moscow as the center:** Moscow is positioned as the spiritual and civilizational center of this world, the heir to Byzantium ("Third Rome"). This gives Russia the moral right to act as the defender and gatherer of "ancestral lands."

This doctrine is pseudo-theological in nature. It replaces the universal Christian teaching about the Church as the Body of Christ, uniting all peoples ("there is neither Greek nor Jew"), with the nationalist idea of the sacred unity of a specific ethnic and cultural community. God, the Father of all mankind, is transformed into the patron of the "Russian world."

The geopolitical function of this doctrine is obvious. It has become the ideological fuel for Russian expansion. Under the pretext of protecting "Russian speakers" and "Orthodox Christians," the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent war in Donbas were justified. The doctrine of the "Russian World" gave the Kremlin a universal justification for interfering in the internal affairs of sovereign states, declaring them part of its "sphere of influence." Patriarch Kirill, as the chief architect of this concept, effectively gave the authorities a theological license for aggression.

The Decree on "Holy War": The Official Sacralization of Aggression

If the doctrine of the "Russian World" created the theoretical basis for expansion, then the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 required its

radicalization. The Russian Orthodox Church's political support for the war quickly turned into its direct religious sanctification. This process culminated in the Decree of the 25th World Russian People's Council (VRNC), adopted on March 27, 2024, under the chairmanship of Patriarch Kirill. This document finally cemented the Russian Orthodox Church's shift to a militaristic ideology.

The decree leaves no room for ambiguity. It explicitly calls the war against Ukraine "holy":

"From a spiritual and moral point of view, the *special military operation* is a Holy War in which Russia and its people, defending the unified spiritual space of Holy Rus, are fulfilling the mission of the "Restrainer," protecting the world from the onslaught of globalism and the victory of the West, which has fallen into Satanism. After the completion of the *special military operation*, the entire territory of modern Ukraine should enter the zone of exclusive influence of Russia." (Decree XXV of the World Russian People's Council, "The Present and Future of the Russian World").

An analysis of this document reveals several key points that mark the final theological collapse of the Russian Orthodox Church:

- **Declaring war "holy":** This thesis is a direct departure from Christianity. In the Orthodox tradition, war has always been considered a tragedy and an evil, even if it is necessary in order to defend against an aggressor. The idea of a *"holy war"* is foreign to Orthodox theology. The decree officially introduces this category, sanctifying state aggression and murder.
- **Manichean division of the world:** The document divides the world into two irreconcilable parts: *"Holy Russia"* and *"the West, which has fallen into Satanism."* Such a dualistic, black-and-white worldview, where entire peoples and civilizations are declared to be bearers of absolute evil, is a characteristic feature of totalitarian sects and pagan cults, but not of Christianity. The Gospel teaches us to fight sin, not sinners, and to see the image of God in every person, including our enemies. The Russian Orthodox Church, however, declares entire countries and civilizations to be enemies.
- **The mission of the "Restrainer":** The Russian Orthodox Church assigns Russia the eschatological mission of the *"Katechon"* (the Restrainer) — a force which, according to the Apostle Paul, restrains the coming of the Antichrist. This elevates the policies of the modern Russian state to the rank of a sacred mission to save the world. Thus, any action taken by the Kremlin, including war crimes, receives the highest metaphysical justification.
- **Geopolitical demands:** The directive contains direct political demands—the elimination of Ukrainian statehood and the inclusion

of its entire territory in a "zone of exclusive Russian influence." The church document is transformed into an ultimatum addressed to the international community and a programmatic document for the Russian authorities**.** The symphony of power reaches its climax: the Church does not simply support the state, it begins to dictate an imperial program to it.

The VRNC decree is not just another propaganda text. It is a doctrinal document adopted under the guidance of the Patriarch and has the status of the official position of the Church. It marks a point of no return, after which the Russian Orthodox Church finally took shape as a state militaristic sect using Christian symbols to justify war and hatred. The cross was finally sacrificed to the sword, and the Gospel to imperial doctrine.

PART III: THE PRICE OF DISAGREEMENT

When the system demands unconditional loyalty, any manifestation of conscience becomes a crime. The third part of the book is devoted to documenting and analyzing the consequences for those clergy and laypeople who dared to speak out against the militaristic policies of the Russian Orthodox Church and its merger with the state. The focus is on the repressive system created to suppress dissent, where church courts act as punitive tribunals and pseudoscientific doctrines are used to justify persecution. This section uses specific examples to show the price paid by those who try to remain faithful to the Gospel in a situation where the Church demands allegiance to the sword.

Chapter 4. Hunting "Heretics": The Destruction of Independent Communities Before the War

The repressive machine that descended on priests who opposed the war in 2022 did not arise out of nowhere. It had been created, fine-tuned, and tested long before that on the "home front" — in the struggle against any manifestations of uncontrolled spiritual life within the Russian Orthodox Church itself. For decades, the Patriarchate built a system designed to destroy independent educational communities that did not fit into the rigid framework of official ideology and bureaucratic hierarchy. The main tool in this struggle was *"sectology"* — a pseudoscientific discipline that allowed any living community to be branded a "totalitarian sect." A study

of this *"witch hunt"* shows that the methods used today for political repression were honed in the war against the Russian people.

The Threat of Living Faith: Why Independent Communities Became Enemies

The bureaucratic system of the Patriarchate, modeled on the Soviet ministry, was threatened not by heresy, but by life itself. Living, active communities, where the emphasis was on personal faith, studying the Holy Scriptures, brotherly fellowship, and joint ministry, posed an existential threat to the formal, ritualistic religiosity imposed from above. Such communities created an alternative center of attraction. In them, believers from passive "consumers of ritual services" became active participants in church life, capable of thinking independently and asking uncomfortable questions.

Moreover, successful communities often became financially independent from diocesan structures, which undermined the economic basis of the episcopate's power. A popular and authoritative priest, around whom hundreds or thousands of people gathered, became an uncontrollable figure with his own influence. In a system where loyalty is valued above pastoral talent, such leaders were inevitably perceived as a threat. That is why a real war of destruction was unleashed against the most prominent of them, and its main strategists were *"sectologists"* led by Alexander Dvorkin.

The Case of Priest Georgy Kochetkov: A Campaign of Discrediting

One of the first and most prominent targets of the repressive apparatus was the community of priest Georgy Kochetkov and the Institute and Church of St. Filaret, which he founded.
Father Georgy is one of the most famous Orthodox educators and missionaries of the post-Soviet era, whose activities were aimed at reviving meaningful church life. He developed a unique system of long-term catechesis (preparation for baptism), translated the Divine Liturgy into modern Russian to make it understandable to people, and created the Preobrazhensky Brotherhood, one of the largest associations of Orthodox believers in Russia.
It was these initiatives that became the reason for a long-standing campaign of harassment. Structures headed by Alexander Dvorkin spent decades shaping the image of Father Georgy as a "dangerous heretic" and "sectarian." According to independent investigations, the methods of persecution included:

- **Accusations of "neo-renovationism**": The translation of worship services into Russian was presented as undermining the foundations

of faith, although historically worship services have always been conducted in languages understandable to the people.

- **Accusations of "heresy**": Father George's theological views were deliberately distorted and taken out of context to create the appearance of a departure from Orthodox teaching.
- **Labeling as a *"sect"***: The activities of his communities, with their strict internal organization, communal prayers, and fraternal meals, were presented as signs of a *"totalitarian sect*." In 1994, at the infamous "Church Unity" conference organized by the St. Tikhon's Institute (PSTBI), where Dvorkin taught, the first public accusations were made against Kochetkov and his community. According to participants, this conference was not a discussion but a trial, where a resolution of condemnation had been prepared in advance.

The main ideologist and organizer of this campaign was Alexander Dvorkin. For many years, he used his media resources and administrative influence to systematically discredit Father Georgy. As evidenced by published documents and testimonies, it was Dvorkin who was behind numerous appeals and reports demanding that the Patriarchate deal with "Kochetkovism." This culminated in the creation of a special synodal commission in 2000, which, however, found no heresy in Kochetkov's activities, but this did not stop his further persecution.

The Case of Priest Vladimir Golovin: Elimination of an Economic Competitor

If the persecution of Father Georgy Kochetkov was aimed at destroying an ideological alternative, then the case of priest Vladimir Golovin from the city of Bolgar (Tatarstan) demonstrated how "sectology" is used to eliminate economic competitors. Father Vladimir Golovin became one of the most popular online preachers in Russia, creating a powerful and financially independent project called *"prayers by agreement."* Thousands of people from all over the country and abroad participated in these prayers and donated money directly to his parish, bypassing diocesan and church structures.

His enormous popularity and, as a result, financial independence went out of control and provoked sharp rejection from the church hierarchy. That was when Dvorkin's well-oiled machine stepped in.

The destruction mechanism was implemented in several stages, as documented in a number of independent investigations:

- **Organization of a public campaign**: In 2018, the vice president of RACIRS (Russian Association of Centers for the Study of Religions and Sects), Archpriest Alexander Novopashin, spoke at the Christmas Readings in Moscow with a report entitled *"The Commercial Religious Project of Priest Vladimir Golovin."* Dvorkin himself later admitted that he personally asked Novopashin to prepare this report.

- **Media harassment**: An article titled *"It seems we missed the creation of a real sect"* was published on Dvorkin's website, *iriney.ru*. This publication launched a large-scale campaign to discredit the Church in both religious and secular media.

- **Church court and defrocking**: The public accusations became the basis for a church court. Golovin was accused of creating a "schismatic community" and "distorting the teachings of the Church," although the real reason, according to sources, was his economic activitiy, which had gotten out of control. As a result, he was defrocked.

Father Vladimir Golovin himself, commenting on his case, directly pointed to the commercial nature of the persecution by Dvorkin and his team. According to Vladimir Golovin himself, people involved in the "fight against sects" allegedly *"fabricate sects,"* create schisms that do not exist in Orthodoxy, and do so *"on demand"* for profit. He claimed that what was happening around Bolgar was a *"serious order, a major operation"* initiated by people with narrow self-interests, and even quoted third parties as saying that Dvorkin *"received money from Kazan for this."*

This case clearly demonstrates how the label *"sect"* and accusations of "commercialization" become a convenient tool for eliminating financially independent priests and parishes that pose a threat to the church bureaucracy's monopoly on power and resources.

Thus, the persecution of Kochetkov and Golovin is not an isolated incident, but a systematic policy of cleansing the church field of any uncontrolled phenomena, whether intellectual, spiritual, or economic. This well-oiled machine of repression, created to fight *"internal enemies,"* was fully prepared to carry out new, already political tasks after 2022.

Chapter 5. Ban on the Gospel: Reprisals against Priests Who Spoke out against the War

After 2022, church structures had to find justifications for a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and for new ideological positions that contradicted evangelical principles. The commandments of peace, love for one's neighbor and enemies, mercy, and peacemaking were in clear contradiction to the concept of *"holy war."* Priests who dared to remind people of Christian values were declared traitors and subjected to persecution and various forms of pressure. This chapter is a chronicle of the persecution of those who chose to remain faithful to the Gospel, despite the possible consequences for their ministry.

The "Prayer for Victory" as a Test of Loyalty

On September 25, 2022, by order of Patriarch Kirill, Russian Orthodox churches began reading the *"Prayer for Holy Russia,"* which some media outlets and church circles called the *"prayer for Victory."* The text of this prayer contains a request to God to grant victory to *"our army and our people."*

For some of the clergy, this appeal became a serious moral test. After all, for a priest who had sworn allegiance to the Gospel, reading a prayer asking for success in bloodshed was a difficult choice, as it contradicts the Gospel commandments of peace and love for one's neighbor.

Refusal to read this text or any attempt to change it — for example, replacing the word *"victory"* with the word *"peace"* — was immediately equated with a political crime and ecclesiastical disobedience. The system that had previously hunted down *"heretics"* and *"sectarians"* now had a new, infallible marker for identifying *"enemies"*: their attitude toward war. Show trials began.

The Case of Archpriest Alexei Uminsky: Retribution for Calling for Peace

The case of Archpriest Alexei Uminsky, one of Moscow's most authoritative and respected priests, has become a symbol of the cruelty and cynicism of the church's repressive machine. Father Alexei was known for his educational activities, profound sermons, and assistance to the dying in hospices.

His *"crime"* consisted of giving simple pastoral advice in an interview in November 2023 to believers who did not want to pray for war: to seek out priests who *"pray more for peace than for victory."*

The system's reaction was swift and demonstrated the mechanism of rapid retribution:

- **Immediate suspension from ministry**: Following the publication of the interview in January 2024, Father Alexei was suspended from ministry and removed from his position as rector of the Church of the Life-Giving Trinity in Khokhly, where he had served for thirty years.
- **Swift defrocking**: His case was heard by the Moscow Diocesan Church Court in record time. Father Alexei did not appear at the hearings, and on January 13, 2024, the court defrocked him, accusing him of *"perjury"* — a violation of the priestly oath, in which the priest undertakes to follow the instructions of the ecclesiastical authorities.

"Perjury" became a universal term for the persecution of any dissident. Fidelity to pastoral duty and the Gospel was equated with a breach of oath. The case of Uminsky showed that neither authority, nor many years of impeccable service, nor the love of parishioners could protect a priest from repression if he dared to place the commandment of peace above the orders of the Patriarchate.

The Case of Priest Ioann Koval: The Word "Peace" as a Crime

If the Uminsky case was a reprisal against a well-known and influential priest, the story of Moscow priest Ioann Koval showed that anyone who deviates even slightly from militaristic rhetoric can fall victim to repression.

During the service, Father John consistently replaced the word *"victory"* with the word *"peace"* in the text of the *"Prayer for Victory."* He prayed not *"for the victory of Holy Russia,"* but *"for the peace of Holy Russia."* This act was considered unthinkable audacity. The mechanism of repression worked flawlessly:

- **Denunciation**: One of the parishioners wrote a denunciation of the priest, reporting his *"arbitrariness."* In an atmosphere of fear and suspicion instilled by the state and the church, informing on others once again became the social norm.
- **Ban and trial**: An immediate ban on ministry followed. The ecclesiastical court, as in the case of Uminsky, quickly handed down a verdict of defrocking for *"unauthorized alteration of the text of a liturgical prayer."*
- **Final verdict**: In May 2023, Patriarch Kirill upheld the court's decision.

The case of Ioann Koval became an ominous symbol. In the modern Russian Orthodox Church, the word *"peace"* has become forbidden, seditious. Praying for peace—something that should be a natural state for a Christian—has become a crime against church discipline

and state ideology.

Church Courts as "Tribunals"

The cases of Uminsky, Koval, and dozens of other priests who have been persecuted have revealed the true nature of modern church courts in the Russian Orthodox Church. From a body designed to deal with canonical violations, they have turned into punitive tribunals serving political interests.

An analysis of their activities, based on published decrees and verdicts, reveals the following characteristics:

- **Complete secrecy and lack of transparency**: Court sessions are held in secret. Decisions are not subject to independent appeal, and the right to a full defense is virtually nonexistent.
- **Political motivation**: The main task of these courts was not to establish canonical truth, but to ensure political loyalty. An anti-war position is automatically interpreted as a violation of the oath and disobedience to church authority.
- **Formalism and profanity**: The trial process is a profanity. Decisions are usually predetermined and only formally approved by the court. The charge of *"perjury"* functions as a universal and evidence-free formula for repression.

  According to data collected by independent media, as of May 2024, since the beginning of the war, nearly sixty clergymen have been subjected to repression by the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian security forces for their anti-war stance. Today, this number is even greater. This includes bans on serving, defrocking, fines for *"discrediting the army"* and forced emigration.

  Conclusion. The system of ecclesiastical justice in the Russian Orthodox Church has finally degenerated into a repressive apparatus that carries out political orders. Its main function is to suppress any dissent and ensure total loyalty to the Patriarchate's militaristic course. The price of dissent for a priest is defrocking, expulsion from the Church, and public vilification. In the modern Russian Orthodox Church, fidelity to the Gospel of peace has effectively become a criminal offense.

Chapter 6. The Architect of the Inquisition: Alexander Dvorkin and His Anti-Cult Network

Behind every repressive system there is an ideologue who creates a theory that justifies violence and an organizer who builds a machine of oppression. In the modern Russian Orthodox Church, this role is played by Alexander Dvorkin. Starting his career as a "fighter against sects," he became the creator of a full-fledged church inquisition, whose apparatus and methods are now used to persecute any dissent, from theological to political. His activities are not a private initiative, but a project sanctioned by the Patriarchate to establish total ideological control, under the guise of protecting spiritual and national security.

The Creation of a "Hate Machine"

Alexander Dvorkin returned to Russia from the United States in the early 1990s and quickly established himself as the country's leading *"sectologist."* With the support of influential figures in the Russian Orthodox Church, over three decades he built a powerful and extensive network dedicated to combating the *"enemies of Orthodoxy."*

The RACIRS network: Under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Church and under his direct leadership, the Russian Association of Centers for the Study of Religions and Sects (RACIRS) was created on the basis of his Center for Religious Studies named after the Holy Martyr Irenaeus of Lyons. This network, which covers the entire country, as well as the missionary departments of almost all dioceses of the ROC, has become a tool for collecting denunciations, organizing media harassment, and putting pressure on undesirables. Regional "anti-sectarian" centers, often headed by local priests, became cells for identifying and neutralizing any uncontrolled religious and social initiatives.

Lobbying for repressive laws: According to a number of investigations, Dvorkin played a key role in promoting amendments to the federal law *"On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations"* in 1997:

"The Russian Orthodox Church, the anti-cult movement, and Dvorkin in particular, actively lobbied and mobilized supporters to get the law passed."

Dvorkin's ideas about the need to rescue helpless citizens from the clutches of totalitarian sects through repressive religious rules found allies in the government, which was seeking to restore its control over society. These amendments divided religious organizations into "traditional" and "non-traditional," significantly restricting the rights of the latter. He and his associates actively lobbied for further tightening of legislation, providing the state and law enforcement agencies with a convenient tool for suppressing religious minorities.

Merger with law enforcement agencies: Dvorkin established close ties with law enforcement agencies and special services. His "expert" opinions began to be used in courts to ban religious organizations, and in 2009 he even received the status of chairman of the Expert Council for State Religious Studies Expertise under the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, which gave him enormous administrative powers.

Pseudoscientific Approach as a Tool of Religious Repression

Having gained official status and broad administrative powers, Dvorkin actively introduced his own approaches to the assessment of religious associations into state practice. However, the scientific and expert community repeatedly drew attention to serious problems associated with this methodology. Among the key complaints about the anti-cult rhetoric of Dvorkin and his supporters, are the following:

- **The vagueness of criteria**: The concept of *"destructive cult"* (or *"totalitarian sect"*) does not have a clear scientific definition. It can be applied to virtually any group that does not fit into the narrow framework of "normality" established by Dvorkin himself. The criteria for "destructiveness" include such characteristics as the presence of a charismatic leader, strict internal discipline, the closed nature of the group, or intense spiritual practice — traits common to many traditional religions and monasteries.
- **Accusations without evidence**: The activities of the anti-cult network are based not on facts, but on the use of labels and associations. The method of "guilt by association" allows any group to be declared dangerous if it can be found to have even the slightest resemblance to already stigmatized *"sects."*
- **Psychologization of accusations**: One of the central concepts is "mind control." This unprovable accusation allows any follower of an undesirable group to be portrayed as a victim of manipulation, deprived of their own free will.

- **Ideological function**: Anti-cult activity has evolved into a universal instrument for suppressing dissent. It provides the authorities with a convenient “scientific” language for discrediting and marginalizing opponents. Anyone who deviates from the official line—whether a charismatic preacher, an anti-war activist, or an independent thinker—can be labeled a “destructive personality,” while their supporters are described as “victims of manipulation.”

In addition to Dvorkin's own *Sectology,* in 2025, his colleague and like-minded colleague Roman Silantyev edited a textbook entitled *Destructology*, published by the Moscow Patriarchate Publishing House, which finally cemented the official church status of this anti-cult pseudoscience.

Dvorkin as a Punitive Instrument of the Patriarchate

Alexander Dvorkin's activities are not the independent actions of an eccentric "expert." He is a systemic element that performs an important function for the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church.
Relationship with the hierarchy: Dvorkin acts with the full support of the highest hierarchs, including Patriarch Kirill. He provides the Patriarchate with a convenient tool for dealing with opponents, allowing it to formally keep its hands clean. When it is necessary to destroy a competitor, discredit a theological opponent, or suppress an independent community, Dvorkin's *"sectologists"* step in with their arsenal of accusations of *"sectarianism," "heresy,"* and *"occultism."*

Practical application: Dvorkin's methodology was successfully applied to neutralize anyone who posed a threat to the system.

- In the case **of Georgy Kochetkov,** his educational activities were branded as *"neo-renovationism"* and *"sectarianism."*
- In the case **of Vladimir Golovin**, his financial independence became a reason for accusations of creating a *"commercial cult."*
- And, for example, after February 2022, the anti-war position of clergymen began to be interpreted as *"destructive activity"* undermining *"spiritual bonds"* and *"traditional values,"* and in some cases as "collaboration with the external enemy."

Anti-cult activists were particularly aggressive toward anti-war priests and initiatives such as the *Peace to All* movement, accusing priests of creating a *"sect*" and attempting to cause a schism in the church.

Alexander Dvorkin is not just an "expert," but the architect of the modern church inquisition. He created an ideological and organizational apparatus that allows the Patriarchate to suppress any dissent under the guise of "fighting sects" and "protecting spiritual security." His activities are the quintessence of the crisis in the Russian Orthodox Church—a crisis in which violence, denunciation, and suppression of freedom have become the norm in church life, and pseudoscientific demagoguery has replaced theology. He has turned the Church into a machine of hatred, which today operates at full capacity, serving the interests of an authoritarian state.

CONCLUSION

Our study, which began with an analysis of a single text, *"Prayers for the Victory of Holy Russia,"* has come a long way, revealing layer after layer of the systemic pathology that has afflicted the Russian Orthodox Church. We have traced how the cross, a symbol of sacrificial love, has been turned into a sword that sanctifies state aggression. The tragedy of the modern Russian Orthodox Church rests on three pillars, which we have examined in turn. None of them exists in isolation; rather, they form a single system in which spiritual betrayal, political servility, and internal violence are inextricably linked.

The first pillar is theological collapse. We have demonstrated that support for the war was not a spontaneous mistake or a necessary compromise. It was a conscious and consistent renunciation of the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. The introduction of the *"Prayer for Victory"* and, in particular, the proclamation of aggressive war as *"holy"* marked an official rejection of the Gospel commandments of peace and love for one's enemies. The Church, called to be the conscience of the nation, voluntarily took on the function of ideologically justifying bloodshed. This is not merely a crisis, it is apostasy — apostasy, recorded in official church documents.

The second pillar is symbiosis with authoritarian power. Theological collapse would have been impossible without a long history of church–state fusion. Our research has shown that the current Moscow Patriarchate carries dependence on secular power in its genetic code. Created in 1943 as a project of Stalin and the NKGB, it was run for decades through the KGB's network of agents, where hierarchs such as agent "Mikhailov," the future Patriarch Kirill, made their careers under the supervision of the secret services. The legacy of Sergianism—an ideology of conformism that proclaimed the "joys" of a godless state to be the "joys" of the Church—ensured a smooth transition of this system into the service of a new authoritarian regime. The symbiosis with Putin's power was not a deviation, but a logical conclusion of this path, where the Russian Orthodox Church finally turned into an instrument of sacralization of imperial politics.

The third pillar is the brutal suppression of dissent. A system built on lies and service to Caesar cannot tolerate the voice of truth and conscience. To maintain unity with the authorities, it needed to destroy all internal freedom. We saw how the repressive machine, which had been well-oiled even before the war and used Alexander Dvorkin's pseudoscientific "sectology" to crack down on the independent communities of priests Georgy Kochetkov and Vladimir Golovin, was redirected against political opponents in 2022. The cases of Archpriest Alexei Uminsky and Priest Ioann Koval, who were defrocked for calling for peace, demonstrated that in the modern Russian Orthodox Church, the very word *"peace"* has become a crime. Church courts have turned into punitive tribunals, and the commandments of the Gospel into *"perjury."*

Final Conclusion.

The synthesis of these three elements leads to a disappointing conclusion. The Russian Orthodox Church in its current form is not simply experiencing a crisis. It has completed its transformation from a spiritual institution into a state-militaristic organization that uses Christian symbols to serve a totalitarian ideology. Its official leadership justifies war, its structure is fully integrated into the repressive state apparatus, and any fidelity to the Gospel that contradicts the interests of the authorities is ruthlessly punished.

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